



Barriers to Historically Black Colleges and Universities Alumni Giving in the Baby Boomer and Silent Generations: An Interpretive Phenomenology Analysis

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Abstract

Most HBCU alumni are not donating at rates substantial enough to aid in the sustainability of their alma maters. In this interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) study, the researchers addressed the lack of and barriers to giving for Baby Boomer and Silent Generations graduates. The researchers chose this population because they are the wealthiest generations and their contributions could make a significant impact for their alma maters (Stillwell, 2014). The researchers also explored their perceptions on online giving due to the growing popularity of integrating online giving in fundraising strategies. The researchers also identified ways HBCUs could increase donations in the Baby Boomer and Silent Generations.

The researchers confirmed most older alumni are reluctant to donate online because of their limited knowledge of the process and mistrust of the security process. The researchers also found the more connected participants were with their alma mater, the more likely they were to donate. To circumvent barriers to alumni giving at HBCUs, the researchers recommend relationship building activities, peer-to-peer fundraising, cultivating a spirit of philanthropy in undergraduate students, educating alumni on the importance of giving, and addressing the security concerns regarding online giving.

Keywords: Baby Boomers, Silent Generations, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and Alumni Giving

1 Introduction

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) originated with the purpose of providing education to African Americans who were unable to enroll in Predominately White Institutions because of their race (Glenn, 1997). Today, the role of these institutions has expanded to include the education of all races. Like most institutions of higher learning, HBCUs depend on federal and private support to operate and provide financial aid to students. This dependence poses a problem for HBCUs because states have cut funding for higher education. The institutions do not have adequate revenue to supplement the funding gap because university endowments are small and alumni donations are low (Clay, 2013).

To operate and sustain despite the decline in federal funding, HBCUs must find strategic ways to increase alumni donations. For most of these colleges and universities, raising tuition is not a viable option. HBCUs are positioned as low-cost institutions that provide access to students with low incomes, and tuition hikes could lead to declines in enrollment. Students typically within HBCUs' enrollment pool due to low-income status would not be able to pay, and other students would have to borrow more money to attend if the cost of tuition is increased (Clay, 2013; Palmer, Hilton & Fountaine, 2012). To fill the gap left by decreasing federal and corporate funding, HBCUs are looking to their alumni for financial support.

Statement of the Problem

HBCUs are faced with challenges that threaten their existence,

and 2 out of 107 of those HBCUs have closed within the last five years (White House Initiative on HBCUs, 2015). A common theme among these universities and other HBCUs is the inadequate alumni giving. The problem this study seeks to address is the lack of alumni giving at HBCUs. Barriers giving for donating in the Silent and Baby Boomer generations may include frustration with the online giving systems or disillusionment with their college experience. In 2014, the percentage of online donations grew by 13%, and this mechanism for giving is predicted to remain a source for securing gifts for many years to come (McCully, 2015). Despite new and innovative ways to donate to higher educational institutions online, alumni donors who are Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964) or in the Silent Generation (born 1927-1945) may be less likely to participate in online giving (Stevenson, 2007). This resistance to making donations online is arguably due to these generations of alumni not being as technologically savvy as younger generation alumni, Generation X (1965-1981) and the Millennials (1982-2002) (Stevenson, 2007).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the barriers to alumni donations by the Silent and Baby Boomer generations with specificity in online giving. These two generations are the wealthiest in America (Stillwell, 2014); if they donated more, it could positively impact the sustainability and mission of HBCUs. If alumni do not participate in giving back, HBCUs may not be able to compete for the best students, faculty, and staff. HBCUs with limited funds may also face enrollment declines, program cuts, mergers, and closures.

Research Questions

What are the barriers to alumni donations?

- a. What is the perception of alumni in the baby boomer and silent generation on online giving?
- b. What impact does the degree of connectivity to the alma mater have on giving?

2 Literature Review

Historically Black Colleges and Universities are faced with financial hurdles that threaten their existence and longevity. These obstacles include economic downturns, cuts in federal funding, increased competition for private donations and inadequate alumni giving. These challenges affect both public and private HBCUs, who trail behind PWIs in resources (Rivard, 2014). Though these institutions have little control over external factors, there is an opportunity for increasing financial support from their alumni.

Social Identity Theory

Multiple researchers have explored the link between social identity theory and behaviors in higher education. Alumni who feel an emotional connection with the college or university view themselves as being part of the in-group, based on social identity theory, and are more likely to donate back (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Lertputtarak & Supitchayangkool, 2014). According to Kritsonis (2007), donors who do not feel connected to their institution and its leadership are least likely to donate a major gift, and they perceive themselves to be part of the out-group. C. W. Jones (2014) found that the lack of transparency in leadership, the institution not getting to know them on a personal level, not being acknowledged or recognized for accomplishments or contributions, and not being part of key alumni meetings are contributing factors. To increase alumni giving, HBCUs must develop a positive sense of identity amongst their alumni. Gasman (2001) recommended that HBCUs work to establish "a sense of ownership in the university," since African Americans are more likely to give back to an organization to which they feel connected (p.288).

Relationship Marketing Theory

The second theoretical framework used in this study is relationship marketing theory. The premise of relationship marketing is that a customer's behavior can be predicted by how strongly they are connected with an organization (Bowden, 2011). For the purpose of this research, the customers are undergraduate students and alumni.

According to Mann (2007), a customer's relationship with an organization can range from "transactional to highly relational" (p. 37). Alumni with transactional relationships with their alma maters are not emotionally invested in the institution and least likely to donate back because they perceive their education as just a service in exchange for their tuition (Mann, 2007).

Building highly relational connections with alumni starts with giving great customer service when they are students. According to Bowden (2011), engaging students through customer service builds trust, satisfaction, and commitment, and they become loyal alumni. Colleges and universities benefit from loyal alumni because they tend to be financially supportive for as long as the relationship remains positive (Oluseye, Tairat, & Emmanuel, 2014).

Sustainability and Survival of HBCUs

HBCUs are fighting to survive, and several factors threaten their sustainability including enrollment drops, declines in federal funding, and leadership conflicts (Rivard, 2014). Lee and Keys (2013) noted that heightened competition, low retention and graduation rates, financial aid system changes, increased regulatory requirements and penalties, and lack of action from administrators are also threats to the sustainability of HBCUs. These institutions are taking measures to budget their finances and secure longevity. In April 2015, Howard University, one of the top HBCUs in the nation, cut 22 staff members to ease financial hardships (Nick, 2015).

Drops in enrollment are a threat to the sustainability of HBCUs. Due to their small endowments, these institutions rely heavily on tuition

revenue (Johnson, Brunch, & Gill, 2015). Fewer registered students mean less federal funding for HBCUs, and enrollment decreased for African American students more than any other race nationwide in 2011 (Johnson et al., 2015). This occurrence could have been contributed to the federal government tightening the eligibility for the Federal Parent Loans for Undergraduate Students (PLUS) and placing new stipulations on HBCUs with high default rates on student loan repayment (Rivard, 2014). PLUS provides loans to parents of undergraduate students to help supplement costs that are not covered by financial aid (Johnson, et al., 2015).

Older Alumni Groups - Silent and Baby Boomer Generations

In a 2007 study, Weerts and Ronco found that age is correlated with alumni giving. According to their research, the older the alumnus is, the more likely they will donate back to their alma mater. A 2015 study by Merrill Lynch and New Wave predicts an \$8 trillion increase in charitable giving in the next two decades because Baby Boomers are retiring and retirees are able to give more.

HBCU alumni from the Silent Generation, also known as Silents, were born between 1925 and 1945, and according to Fogg (2008), were influenced by the Great Depression, World War II, and the Korean War. Fogg (2008) explained that this generation is known for valuing loyalty, recognition of hierarchy, and for being resistant to change. They are also the most generous generation according to Rovner (2013), and 88% make charitable donations. Since Silents are the wealthiest and most generous generation, their donations could significantly impact their alma maters.

Born between 1946 and 1964, HBCU alumni, aged 51 to 70, are classified as Baby Boomers (Fogg, 2008). During 18-year span, there was a boost in the U.S. birthrate called the "Baby Boom", and according to Macunovich (2000), this phenomenon was arguably due to Americans desiring to get back to normalcy after World War Two. Most Baby Boomers who attended HBCUs received their undergraduate degree over 30 years ago and, like the Silent Generation, owe much of their opportunities and success to HBCUs, which were their only segue to higher education during a period of segregation (Clay, 2013). Because people are living longer and the birth rate is declining in America, Baby Boomers are the fastest growing demographic (Jacobson, 2015). According to Rovner (2013), 43% of charitable donations come from Baby Boomers and 72% of the generation are donors. Due to the large population of the Baby Boomer generation, their donations could greatly impact the alumni participation rates at HBCUs.

Differences in Donating between PWIs and HBCUs

Though studies showed African Americans donated a larger percentage of their income, there is a disparity between alumni giving from HBCUs and PWIs. According to Johnson (2013), PWI alumni are able to provide more financial support to their institutions due to the wealth gap between alumni from PWIs and alumni from HBCUs. A 2010 study found that Caucasians had six times more accumulated wealth than African Americans (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013).

3 Methods

This study was best done as a qualitative study because not only did it allow the researchers to gather the thoughts and opinions of the participants about alumni giving, but it also allowed the researchers to tap into the participant's perceptions. In this study, the researchers used IPA to gather data through interviews. The researchers did not use other methodologies in this study because, according to Larkin, Watts and Clifton (2006), other approaches could not "produce a coherent, third-person, and psychologically informed description, which tries to get as 'close' to the participant's view as is possible" (p.104).

Sample

During this study, the researchers interviewed four alumni in the Silent and Baby Boomer generations (aged 51 to 92) who graduated in good standing from a four-year HBCU. The researchers ensured an even distribution of male, female, Baby Boomer and Silent Generation participants were included in this research through snowball sampling. According to David (2008) the snowballing technique is useful when study

participants are hard to find due to sample qualifications. As part of snowball sampling, the researchers emailed a flyer to HBCU alumni and asked them to refer individuals meeting the sample criteria. Next, the researchers sent a recruitment letter and consent form to prospective participants requesting permission to conduct the study. Upon the receipt of consent form with signatures, the researchers proceeded with 30 minute to one-hour semi-structured interviews of four HBCU alumni in the Baby Boomer and Silent Generations.

The subjects responded to structured interview questions, and the researchers recorded the audio of the interview. Participation was voluntary which is communicated clearly to participants in the consent form. Through the consent form, participants learned they could withdraw at any time and refuse to be recorded.

Due to the short timeframe for the study, the researchers selected individuals who were in close driving proximity. Before each session, the researchers described the nature of the interview and presented each participant with a consent form to sign. For anonymity, each participant was assigned a pseudonym.

Data Collection

Research data from this study were gathered from face-to-face semi-structured interviews because of the emphasis on the shared experiences of how older alumni in the Baby Boomer and Silent Generations connect and give back to their alma maters. The recorded interviews took place at neutral locations such as a library, office, conference room or bookstore. According to Merriam (2015), it is important for the researchers to remain open-minded and unbiased so they can understand the experiences of the participants. During the interviews, the participants were asked a series of identical questions related to barriers to alumni donations, how they felt about online giving, and whether or not they felt connected with the institution post-graduation. Once the interview process was over, the researchers transcribed the responses of the participants verbatim. For triangulation, the researchers used recordings, field notes and member checking to verify what was said during the interviews.

Data Analysis

In this study, interview transcripts were analyzed by the researchers using IPA and grounded coding approaches. When reviewing the interview transcripts, the researchers identified themes as they emerge in the study using the grounded theory approach. According to Taylor and Gibbs (2010), researchers can use grounded codes instead identifying codes before the interview from pre-existing theories. The researchers were better enabled to put aside biases and focus on finding themes without prejudice and preconceived notions by using this method (Taylor & Gibbs, 2010).

4 Results

Description of Participants

The researchers chose four alumni from two HBCUs in the Southwest region of the United States. Two were part of the Silent Generation and the other two were Baby Boomers. Three of the participants received their undergraduate degree from Silver State University (pseudonym), and the other received his undergraduate degree from Bronze State University (pseudonym). The participants graduated from their alma maters between 1965 and 1979, and their ages ranged from 58 to 75 (See Table 1).

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Name	Age	Gender	Generation	University	Grad. Year
Inez	75	Female	Silent	Silver State	1977
Alfred	75	Male	Silent	Silver State	1965

Michelle	60	Female	Baby Boomer	Silver State	1977
Jim	58	Male	Baby Boomer	Bronze State	1979

Research Questions

RQ1: What are the barriers to alumni donations?

Study participants were asked what they perceive as barriers to donating to their alma maters. Only one participant, Michelle, was a non-donor, meaning she had never made a financial donation to her university. Though she was on campus weekly and knew where and how to donate, she never made time to do it. One reason Michelle did not feel compelled to donate is the disconnection with her classmates. She explained:

Our class of 77, we haven't done anything to go back as a class.

And I think that prevents you from really giving as much as you would if your class, if others were as eagerly active as you are. I think that kind of hampers that.

Another barrier to alumni donating is the lack of direct communication and personal solicitations. When asked how well Silver State engaged and kept Michelle informed about current events, she derisively answered, "Well, luckily I live here in the city." Then Michelle went on to describe the elaborate Silver State billboards around the area and the news coverage about the university she views on television. This prompted the researchers to ask if Michelle ever receives any personal communications from Silver State. Michelle thoughtfully reflected:

Personal communications... Now, I'm not a member of the alumni association, however, I still deal with the Silver Sports Association at Silver State. Those ladies are always giving you something about what's going on at Silver State. I still get the calendar for the year for the school when I'm on campus, at a game, or at an event. That's pretty much how I'm kept informed about what's going on over there.

When asked if Michelle ever received any personal solicitations from Silver State, Michelle disappointedly replied:

No I haven't. Surprising, I haven't here lately. I have in the past. But even when I was on the website the other day, they have my correct information and everything. And I have not heard a lot from the alumni association or development from Silver State. No, I haven't.

Not receiving personal communications or solicitations is a barrier to Michelle donating to Silver State. From Michelle's interview, the researchers also gathered alumni not knowing how their money would be used as a barrier to them donating to their alma mater. Michelle expressed with concern:

You need to see your money. And a lot of organizations don't put a lot of effort into making sure you can see where your funds are going...you hear these negatives when you give to nonprofits or give to organizations, half of it doesn't get to where it needs to be. So it's always that fear in the back of your mind, "are they doing the right thing with my money?"

Michelle did not donate directly to Silver State University, but she mentioned she donated to the children's hospital at her place of employment and to a coin drive hosted by the Southwestern Atlantic Conference at Silver State basketball games. She donated to these two areas because she saw how the money was being used. Jim was a lapsed donor who had not donated to Bronze State since 2013 because he retired and was on a fixed income. He also discontinued his membership with the alumni association because of his retirement status and his part-time job.

He explained:

I try to give back as much as possible. Of course I attend as many games as I can, and I go back to homecoming every year. I used to be associated with the alumni chapter here in the county before I retired. But with my work schedule I wasn't able to keep up that pace.

Alfred is confident that some of his peers do not donate because they disagree with decisions made by administration. He gave an example of when he tried to solicit a financially stable classmate to contribute to their 50th graduation reunion. The classmate refused to give because she was unhappy the way things were going on campus.

SQ1: What is the perception of alumni in the Baby Boomer and Silent

Generation on online giving?

The researchers found only one out of the four interview participants had a positive perception of online giving. Inez, who is part of Silent Generation, not only donated online, but she renewed her alumni association membership, paid bills, and banked online. Inez enjoyed the convenience of conducting online transactions. She stated, "I just sit here and plug it in and it's done. I get confirmation back that it's been received. So that's easy." Though Inez was at ease with donating online, she understood her peers may be reluctant and intimidated about the process. She felt reassurance from her alma mater that the process is safe and secure would help put her peers at ease. She also encouraged her peers to give online donations a try. She assured:

I would just encourage people said go ahead and take that chance and make that contribution because it's really easy to do that for our school. I haven't found any problems with it. I think we have people...we have accountability. I believe that, and if I didn't, I wouldn't keep giving.

Alfred, who was also part of the Silent Generation, did not have the same perception of online giving. He preferred donating through writing checks. He confessed:

Well, I've seen so much about computers and hacking, and to be honest with you, and I hate to say this, but I'm computer illiterate. I mean, I can pull up my emails and what have you, but as far as making transactions and all of that, and paying bills by the computer, I haven't reached the stage at this point... And being 75 years old, I think I'm going to stay where I am... Not unless they stop taking checks (laughter) then I have to do something else. Michelle, the non-donor in the Baby Boomer Generation, was hesitant about putting her debit card information online. She noted that if she were to give a donation in the future, it would be by check. Part of her uneasiness about donating online stems her mistrust of online security.

She explained:

I understand speed. I understand being in the 21st-century. I understand all of that. But I still have some drawbacks to that because I know of a personal friend of mine who did that. She looked up in her account was just wiped out. People are so dishonest in this society in which we live. I noticed they got the firewalls and protective measures, but people can break all of that. Just like you created it, someone can access it. So, I just don't do that.

SQ2: Does the degree of connectivity to the alma mater have an effect on giving?

The researchers concluded the degree of connectivity study participants had with their alma mater affected their donation patterns. Inez and Alfred, of the Silent Generation, were involved with their alma maters during the time of the interview and were also active financial donors. Michelle and Jim, the two Baby Boomers, were not connected to their alma mater through active memberships nor financial donations. Inez was connected to Silver state through her membership with the alumni association, and she led the faculty and staff giving campaign for her department.

Inez also led a senior giving initiative, and in 2015 they collectively raised \$10,000 to establish an endowed scholarship for students at Silver State. She added that over the course of 2015, she personally donated over \$5,000 to Silver State. In addition to being part of organizations directly connected to Silver State, Inez developed relationships with all the university presidents since her undergraduate year. She proudly explained, "I knew all the presidents...I got a chance to actually meet them, sit in their office and talk to them."

Alfred was also heavily connected with Silver State University. He was a lifetime member of the alumni association, and supported the athletic program. Alfred's connection with Silver State started during his undergraduate years when he worked with the athletic department and was on the yearbook staff. He felt his alma mater a good job of keeping him engaged and informed about current events throughout the years. He expressed:

By the mere fact of my family and I coming up to a lot of different events and interacting with other alumni, it had been tremendously important in keeping us up to breast of all the activities going on and what the university is doing. And also by being a lifetime

member of the alumni association, we get constant information updating us and telling us the status of the institution and who's making donations and things of that nature.

Since Michelle was not actively involved in any clubs and organizations directly related to Silver State, the information and updates she received were second hand. Jim was a member of Bronze State's alumni association, but after he retired, was put on a fixed income, and picked up a part-time job, he no longer found time to be involved. For that reason, his connectivity decreased and as a result, he discontinued his financial support.

5 Conclusion and Discussions

The purpose of the study is for the researchers to identify barriers to alumni giving for HBCU alumni in the Baby Boomer and Silent Generations with specificity in online giving. By analyzing the data in the IPA style interviews, the researchers answered the following questions that shaped the study:

RQ1: What are the barriers to alumni donations?

In the study, the first two participants were donors (Inez and Alfred), the third was a non-donor (Michelle) and the fourth was a lapsed donor who had not donated in two years (Jim). The researchers identified the following barriers to HBCU alumni giving in the Baby Boomer and Silent Generations: disengagement, lack of personal communication and solicitations, mistrust or lack of knowledge on how funds will be used, financial hardships, and disgruntlement. These finding tie closely to the reviewed literature in the study.

Disengagement

Sheperd (2015) and Stephenson and Bell (2014) found alumni with a strong sense of identity or connection with their alma maters are more likely to make financial donations. The researchers also found this to be true, as the least connected participant, Michelle, never donated before. Michelle mentioned a disconnection with her classmates impeded her willingness to donate.

Lack of Personal Communication and Solicitations

The researchers found that though Michelle was kept abreast of current events at Silver State, it was through second-hand information. Since she lived in the same city as her alma mater, she was able to see the university's outdoor billboards and receive updates from local news coverage. Michelle's friends, who were part of a Silver State affinity group, also kept her informed about Silver State's current events. The researchers' findings align with C.W. Jones' 2014 study that identified poor communication as a barrier to donating back.

Mistrust or Lack of Knowledge on How Funds Will be Used

Schmidt (2015) reported a top barrier to alumni giving is mistrust of how the institution will use the money, and donors with a high level of trust or more likely to give back. Additionally, C.W. Jones (2014) noted 50% of alumni in her study expressed that knowing how donations would be used motivated them to give. When the only non-donor, Michelle, was asked what would motivate her to give, she explained she would give to a worthy cause and she likes to see how the money is being used. Though Michelle does not financially support Silver State University, she is a charitable giver to other organizations and is driven by seeing the results of her financial donations.

Financial Hardships

Jim used to be part of the Bronze State Alumni Association until he retired, was placed on a fixed income and no longer had time because of working a part-time job. For that reason, he has not given in two years. This finding is in line with the studies conducted by C.W. Jones (2014), Sheperd (2015), Stephenson and Bell (2014) who all found financial hardships to be a barrier to giving.

Disgruntlement

Though none of the participants mentioned any personal grievances with their alma mater, Alfred forewarned through personal experience some of his peers "stop giving as a result of things not going the way

they think it should go.”

SQ1: What is the perception of alumni in the Baby Boomer and Silent Generation on online giving?

The researchers found that 75% of the participants have never donated online and have no intention of doing so in the future. Inez, who was 75 and one of the oldest participants in the study, was the only one who made online transactions and enjoyed the convenience of the process. Alfred and Jim confessed they are “computer illiterate” and not willing to learn how to donate online because of their age. Michelle is reluctant to give online because she does not trust the security measures that are in place to protect your private information. All three participants who have not given online expressed they are leery of their computers being hacked or someone stealing their identity. Additionally, the three participants emphasized they would stick donating through writing checks or using money orders.

SQ2: What impact does the degree of connectivity to the alma mater have on giving?

The researchers found the more connected participants were with their alma mater, the more likely they were to donate (social identity theory). The two participants actively involved with their universities were also donors. The two participants who were not connected with their alma mater through memberships either never donated before or ceased donations. The researchers also discovered that those with continued relationships with their alma mater over the years continue to give. This exemplifies the relationship marketing theory.

6 Conclusion

The researcher used the following research questions and sub questions to guide the study: (RQ1) What are the barriers to alumni donations? (SQ1) What is the perception of alumni in the baby boomer and silent generation on online giving? (SQ2) Does the degree of connectivity to the alma mater have an effect on giving? (RQ2) How can HBCUs increase the amount of donations received by alumni, specifically in the Baby Boomer and Silent Generations? These questions allowed to researcher to identify themes through an IPA approach. Through the emergent themes, the researcher uncovered the following barriers to older alumni donating back to their alma maters: disengagement, lack of personal communication and solicitations, mistrust or lack of knowledge on how funds will be used, financial hardships, and disgruntlement. To circumvent the barriers, the researcher recommends (a) relationship building activities to increase social identity, (b) inviting older donors back to campus (c) peer-to-peer fundraising, (d) reconnecting with older alumni at athletic events, (e) cultivating a spirit of philanthropy in students during their undergraduate years, and (f) educating alumni on the importance of giving and how donations are being used. The researchers also confirmed most older alumni are reluctant to donate online and are not willing learn how. All but one participant in the study were not comfortable with online giving because of their limited knowledge of computers and mistrust of the security process. To keep the Baby Boomer and Silent Generation alumni engaged in giving back, the researchers recommend HBCU leaders use segmented and integrated fundraising approaches inclusive of direct mail solicitations, which are preferred by the donors over online giving campaigns.

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